

Department of Industrial Relations
NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

January 22, 1953

MEMORANDUM

TO: ADMINISTRATION

From: Julius A. Thomas
and
Henry W. Pope

Subj: CONFERENCE WITH MR. ALBERT BERDIS, WORKS MANAGER, AND
MR. FRED LAFFERTY, INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS MANAGER, OF
UNITED STATES STEEL, FAIRLESS WORKS, MORRISVILLE, PA.,
JANUARY 22, 1953.

On Thursday, January 22, Mr. Pope and I went to Morrisville for a 10:00 o'clock conference with the above-mentioned representatives of Fairless Works, United States Steel. This conference was arranged to discuss with Mr. Berdis several problems related to Negro employment at the Fairless Works. Mr. Berdis had not seen either the memorandum sent to Mr. Hood by Mr. Dowling or the reply which Mr. Dowling received last week. It was obviously impossible for either of these men to discuss the content of Mr. Hood's letter.

Among the things we attempted to determine were:

- A. The number of Negroes employed;
- B. The number applying for employment;
- C. The number applying for clerical jobs and apprenticeship opportunities; and
- D. The job areas in which people would be employed from the open labor market especially technically trained people.

This report is, therefore, the essence of what we were able to get in the conference:

- A. Both Mr. Berdis and Mr. Lafferty said they have been employing Negroes for production jobs, but no one had had time to make an estimate of the number. The impression was gathered that there is no significant number of Negroes already on the job. There was no mention made of having transferred any Negroes from other U. S. Steel operations to the Fairless Works.

- B. Mr. Lafferty reported that relatively few Negroes were applying for jobs at the Fairless Works. He attributed this to the fact that there seemed to be abundant employment opportunities in the area, and the starting rate for new production employees is \$1.49 an hour (Grade 2). He said that employment had been offered to a number of men, Negro and white, but they had declined the jobs because the starting rate did not justify changing their present employment. He said he thought the company was doing its usual honest job in appraising the potentialities of all job applicants without discrimination.
- C. Mr. Lafferty said that a half dozen girls applied for clerical jobs as typists, etc. All of them are required to pass the Minnesota Clerical Test and a simple typing test. He said none of the colored girls successfully passed the tests. I think this point needs further investigation.

He said, also, that they were beginning their apprenticeship program and a half dozen Negro boys had applied for employment and possibly enrollment in the apprenticeship program. Some were either students or graduates of Bordentown Industrial School, according to Mr. Lafferty. None of the boys passed this test successfully. This is another item that needs further exploration. U. S. Steel has an elaborate apprenticeship system, and high school graduates who are successful in enrolling usually reach the highest job grades in the production operations. Historically, very few Negroes have had opportunities to obtain training and work experience in this apprenticeship program. Mr. Lafferty said that the company was always willing to interview and consider for employment any young people who had the necessary qualifications for either clerical jobs or the apprenticeship openings.

- D. Mr. Berdis explained in some detail the corporation's procedure in hiring technical personnel. U. S. Steel maintains its own construction staff, and the majority of the men connected with plant construction would complete their operation and go on to something else. The recruitment of these men is a central office function, since this staff works out of the Pittsburgh office.

The company also sets up a pool of technically trained men for operations. This includes engineers, metallurgists, chemists, etc. These men are recruited from the various colleges and universities, placed in a central training program managed by the home office in Pittsburgh and then assigned to various operations in the company. Technical people of this grade are rarely employed by a local plant, and it was Mr. Berdis' feeling that his office would hire few, if any, technically trained people of this job level. He said, further, that we should discuss this matter with Mr. Earl Moore and Mr. C. D. Feight. The latter is General Staff Supervisor, whose office is in Pittsburgh.

There was some discussion of the housing situation in the area. Mr. Berdis contended that the company has nothing to do with housing except the Fairless Hills Project. He said that the company was glad to see private builders constructing houses because it made it much easier for employees to obtain shelter in the area of their employment. It also assured the company of continuing population from which to draw workers in the months and years ahead. Apparently, several additional contractors are planning the construction of houses of some sort in the general area. Mr. Berdis named a few of them, but we did not make specific notes on them.

In our general discussions with these two men, we took occasion to point out the reasons for our deep concern. The fact that U. S. Steel has no technically trained Negroes in its labor force suggests that the company has been operating on a policy which excluded Negroes from certain operations. We reminded Mr. Berdis that this situation had been pointed out to Mr. Moore and he had indicated a desire to employ competent engineers or metallurgists if they could be found.

We stated, further, that we were interested in the apprenticeship program because few Negro youngsters were ever enrolled in apprenticeship programs set up by large companies like U. S. Steel. This is an area which has been receiving attention from this Department as well as Vocational Services for a long time, and we were not too surprised to learn that relatively few Negro boys had applied for participation in this phase of their manpower program.

We called attention to the fact that this entire area was about to become a duplication of similar undesirable developments in other sections of the country. We mentioned specifically the Oak Ridge, Tennessee, situation in which Negroes are completely separated from the main community in Oak Ridge. The same combination of circumstances seems to contribute to this kind of pattern - that is, no Negroes in certain types of jobs, and, therefore, none eligible for living in certain types of housing. We said to Mr. Berdis that the chances are there will be a small nucleus of Negro workers at the Fairless Works, and that, in all probability, some enterprising builder will decide to stick up a few cheap houses in a segregated neighborhood which would be available to these Negroes. Mr. Berdis agreed that this could happen because most of the present Negro labor force commuted from Camden or Philadelphia. He said he had had relatively few applicants from Trenton and the Trenton area.

The final point we stressed with Mr. Berdis was the fact that the company was exposing itself to some very unpleasant public relations. We explained that the public was entitled to know what had resulted from our discussions with the company, and that, sooner or later, several of the newspapers would become curious about it and would probably say some things that the company would not like. He recognized this and thought it was a consideration that ought to be taken up with Mr. Moore and people above his level.

The most hopeful thing that came out of our discussions was a recognition of the several problems we presented. Undoubtedly, neither Mr. Berdis nor Mr. Lafferty had any clear-cut ideas about the ramifications of this whole race relations employment situation. Mr. Berdis, unofficially, agreed that he would like to work more closely with the National Urban League in the hope that the company could do the best possible job with respect to the employment of Negroes and increasing the number of youngsters in the apprenticeship program.